DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 694 CS 212 992

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TITLE Chaos in Derrida and Student Texts.
PUB DATE Mar 91
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Discourse Analysis; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; *Rhetoric; *Rhetorical Theory; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; *Derrida (Jacques); Text Factors

ABSTRACT

Students must learn to maintain authority over their texts as they attempt to deal with the chaos they encounter when they approach a writing task. The authority with which Jacques Derrida deals with chaos in his essay, "...That Dangerous Supplement," suggests some strategies. In his essay, Derrida seems to be able to move the reader back and forth between order and chaos without engendering a state of panic or even a sense of disorganization. He maintains his authority by using strategies which are generally associated with fiction. He co-opts the reader into the story through bonding the reader with the narrator, establishing a plot, and involving fictional characters in a meaningful conflict. The plot involves the fictive Rousseau's attempt to find the presence which is absent in speech. Writing becomes the villain, as it can be viewed as a dangerous supplement to speech, replacing the presence which is absent in writing with an imaginary one. After exposing writing as a seductive reappropriation of presence, Derrida shows that it is not the author but the reader who imposes meaning on the text, and leaves the reader in chaos. Chaos and order do not overtake each other however, but are present at the same time. Fiction resides in all good essays--enabling would-be academic writers to incorporate fictive strategies into their expository writing can be a means of achieving an authoritative voice. (PRA)

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CHAOS IN DERRIDA AND STUDENT TEXTS

My concern is with finding a way for students to maintain authority over their texts as they attempt to deal with the chaos they encounter when they approach a writing task. My question is, Can students create texts which incorporate their initially chaotic ideas without sublimating those ideas into a lifeless, hierarchical structure while, simultaneously, maintaining an authoritative voice?

I became intrigued with this issue as I analyzed the authority with which Jacques Derrida deals with chaos in his essay, "...That Dangerous Supplement" (*Of Grammatology* 141). In this essay, Derrida seems to be able to move the reader back and forth between order and chaos without engendering a state of panic or even a sense of disorganization. I came to believe that Derrida maintains his authority in this essay by using strategies which are generally associated with the writing of fiction. He creates a narrator, fictional characters, a plot and a crisis.

The Prologue

Derrida begins the Rousseau essay with an introduction in which he co-opts the reader into the story. He does this in three ways: through bonding the reader with the narrator, through establishing a plot which promises suspense and intrigue, and through involving fictional characters in a meaningful conflict.

The narrator is a kind, patient pedagogue. He is not Derrida, although Derrida may have these qualities. Derrida has been erased from the text through the process he delineates in this essay. He is replaced with a fictive mentor who bonds us in a pedagogical relationship, guiding us along the paths of a metaphysical universe.

The journey is one of danger and intrigue. This fact also co-opts us into reading the text since it appears to promise the kind of suspense we encounter in reading Poe or viewing a Hitchcock film. The conflict is described as one of loss, of unforeseen danger, and even of death.

The narration is primarily about the fictive character, Rousseau. Although the historical Rousseau wrote the original texts through which our narrator wanders, the Rousseau we

CS2/2998

meet in the essay is not this historical person. Rather, he is a fictive character who is assigned motivation and agency by the author. The plot involves the fictive Rousseau's attempt to find the presence which is absent in speech.

But Rousseau is not the only character. The presence Rousseau seeks also assumes a persona. It is the villain Rousseau encounters in his desperate search. It is a personal presence which "lies in wait for us from the first word" (141). Rousseau's goal is to redeem this villainous, dislocated presence and reconstruct it in writing.

This romantic reconstruction, however, turns into a tragedy. Rousseau renounces his present life in order to reconstruct himself in writing and believes that he has, indeed, found presence, that death by writing brings life. But the narrator questions this new life. He shows that Rousseau's literary suicide is cimpljy a symbolic reappropriation of presence. All that really remains is difference (142).

This points to the real plot of the narration we are about to enter. We will not simply view Rousseau on a romantic quest in search of the presence which eludes him in speech; we will see the tragedy which evolves when the presence he reappropriates in writing is also taken away. As we view this event—in fact, participate in it in collusion with the narrator who has co-opted us—we will witness the crumbling of the myth which holds all of Western thought together. We will, then, participate in our own deconstruction. But we approach this willingly because the mentor-narrator has seduced us with a tale of mystery. And it is a tale in which we have been so implicated in the action that we realize we must move through to the narrative's conclusion. We cannot go back; we have already seen that the past has deluded us into an illusory sense of presence. We can only go forward to the place where difference may precede presence. We choose to go with the narrator because he knows the way.

The Supplement

As we move into the body of the narrative, it is important to see the perspective from which it is viewed. The narrator says we must "think Rousseau's experience and his theory of writing together" (144). We will observe Rousseau's experience subjectively but, at the same time, objectively observe the way it affects his theory of writing.

The word "supplement" is introduced as a way of describing the relationship of the objective and subjective perspectives. Writing, viewed subjectively, is an addition to speech; it is an urgent addition that is added in response to a situation of distress. But viewed objectively, it is a dangerous supplement; it does not reinscribe presence but adds an image or representation; it replaces the presence which is absent in writing with an imaginary presence.

The supplement, then, takes on the character of a villain. It is given a personna and

appears to be the agent of destruction for writing as well as for the civilization which has both produced writing and been produced by writing. This move reinforces Derrida's authority in the text. By assigning agency to a fictive character who is, in fact, not a human character at all but a personification of an inanimate process, Derrida removes himself, the narrator, and Rousseau from accepting any responsibility for the violence that character imposes on the metaphysical structuring of our world. We do not become angry with Derrida for destroying our metaphysical presuppositions—or with his narrator, or with the author of the original story. Instead, we accept Derrida's fictive representations and, in the process, are seduced into accepting the propositions which support them. Rousseau's fate has become our own. Writing is deconstructing our own presence, along with that of Rousseau, and we are powerless to do anything about it.

The crisis has occurred. Writing has been exposed for what it is: a seductive reappropriation of presence. The narrator has only to bring the story to a resolution. But how can the conflict be resolved? How can the power of the villainous writing which has seduced the hero, Rousseau, and reduced him to eternal punishment be contained?

The resolution is surprising. The supplement provides its own cure. The narrator says, "The supplement has not only the power of procuring an absent presence through its image...it holds it at a distance and masters it" (155).

This leads the narrator to the act of reading. He shows that it was not the author, but the reader, who imposed meaning on the text. And now the categories which produced meaning to the reader are also taken away. "Reading should not only abandon these categories—which are also, let us recall in passing, the founding categories of metaphysics—but should produce the law of this relationship to the concept of the supplement" (163). The narrator leaves the reader, then, in chaos.

The Supplement of Chaos and Order

If we review our experience in the text up to this point, we recognize that chaos is always connected with order. The chaos created by death of presence in speech was removed by the reconstruction of presence in writing; when that was revealed to be an illusory presence, it was reconstructed as a way of procuring an absent presence. Order seems to follow chaos and chaos follows order. At first, this would appear to place the narrative in a traditional romantic emplotment, for, as Haydon White points out, both comedy (order from chaos) and tragedy (chaos from order) rely upon a myth of reconciliation between the "divided state in which men find themselves in this world" (9). We might be tempted to conclude that we can feel secure at the end of Derrida's essay because we will eventually find order in chaos. But this is a misreading of Derrida. We must look carefully at the way he uses the word "supplement."

The supplement is not a hierarchy. It is not chaos overtaking order or the reverse of this. Rather, it is the presence, at the same time, of both chaos and order. The supplement is evidence of another order: that of difference. This difference, or différance as Derrida calls it in his coined word, is not a form but an "effect' (*Différance* 11) which is within a system that no longer tolerates binary opposition.

Chaos in Writing

As we ponder the simultaneous presence of chaos and order, we are drawn back to our students' texts. Isn't this the problem we encounter most often in working with beginning writers? Don't our students lack authority because they are unable to control the simultaneous presence of chaos and order on the surface of their texts?

We have learned to teach writing as a way of hiding chaos. Derrida refers to this when he describes a written text as a "web;" an artifact imposed between the reader and writer (*Dissemination* 63). Yet, as Jasper Neel has pointed out, if we attempt to hide all chaos with the web of writing, we are left with an X essay: a dogmatic monologue in which a "truth" is presented in the thesis statement, supported with three non-controversial paragraphs, and reaffirmed in the conclusion (84). This is precisely the kind of essay we receive from students who are uncomfortable with an authoritative voice; they use this formulaic discourse to suppress conflicting thoughts in order to speak from a position which will not engender debate or dialog.

I wonder if Derrida's Rousseau essay might provide our students with strategies for avoiding the X essay while producing a text in which they can speak with authority. By using the techniques of fiction, Derrida is able to assume authority without risking his personal vulnerability. And, by maintaining a supplementary relationship between chaos and order, he enables the reader to participate in a vital experience rather than subjecting the reader to a view, at a respectable distance, of a cold, cognitive construction.

This is not a suggestion that we replace expository writing with courses in writing the short story. Derrida's essay follows many of the conventions of the traditional expository form. Instead, it is a suggestion that we recognize the fiction that resides in all good essays—and that we enable our would-be academic writers to incorporate fictive strategies into their expository writing as a means of achieving an authoritative voice.

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